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"SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – A WORKABLE ACTION PLAN?"

The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg was the largest-ever global conference on a question of fundamental importance: how can humanity's present day needs be met without jeopardizing those of future generation? Is the plan of action developed at the Johannesburg conference a step toward the goal of sustainable development or, as some critics charge, was the conference simply too big a gathering to be effective? In this edition of **World Chronicle**, Nitin Desai, the Secretary-General of the Johannesburg conference and UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, discusses what was achieved, and what progress still needs to be made, on the path to sustainable development.

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ANNOUNCER: From the United Nations in New York, an unedited interview programme on global issues. This is **World Chronicle**

And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is World Chronicle. The Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development was the largest ever-international conference, drawing sixty-five thousand participants from around the world. Its challenge: to set out an action plan for the world to meet today's needs while not jeopardizing – perhaps forever – the needs of future generations. Did it succeed? Our guest today was the Secretary-General of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. He is Nitin Desai, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs. Joining me to talk to Mr. Desai are Louis Hamann of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* and Jack Freeman of *the Earth Times*.

Mr. Desai, welcome to **World Chronicle**. Mr. Under Secretary-General, before we came on the air you said you would shoot me if I used that old cliché about the half empty or half full glass. Nevertheless the summit conference most surely have been a bit of a disappointment in that, unless you have a different take on it, that it did not quite meet all the hopes and expectations that UN people by and large had.

DESAI: I didn't say as far as UN people are concerned, it probably exceeded expectations because most UN people thought it would be extremely difficult to get any sort of agreement. What really matters is what the member states think, and the member states perception is that yes, it succeeded. Why? Two things: Our first objective was to create some sense of urgency about tackling problems of poverty and environmental stress. I think we succeeded in that and one reason, excellent media coverage, excellent issue based media coverage of the summit; and two if you see the tone and tenor of speeches that the Heads of states and governments made ...Jacques Chirac, Tony Blair, Schröeder, all of them, you could see that there were clearly focusing their attention very much on the urgency of action. So that is one thing. Second, we wanted some commitments on real programmes, not just words, and we got those, partly in the programme itself where they included the many key areas targets and timetables, not on renewable energy which is what everybody is speaking on, but even there, there is a lot that they have agreed to, which is very positive, but in other areas, they did that, including a lot, much more on sustainable consumption that I was expecting: A ten year

programme of work, commitments on the reaching sustainability in the use of marine resources by 2015, the commitment on marine protected areas, the commitment on stopping the bio diversity loss by 2010, the commitment on chemical safety. Now these were things, which are very clear in terms of the goals, the targets, the timetables. I think they probably went a little bit beyond what many people weren't expecting. So I would say that, I would argue that in terms of what people were expecting from the summit, at least as far as governments are concerned, and for that matter my partners in the UN are concerned, by and large we got it. There are a few areas like renewable energy we would have liked it to be stronger. We got renewable energy up there and as a matter of urgency. And we never had that before.

LITTLEJOHNS: You have mentioned the important role that the media played and the fact that or it is a fact that there were a huge number of corresponts there, but the media interpretation analysis of the plan of action and the other things that came out of the conference was almost wholly negative.

DESAI: No! I have been seeing the media, I've just been reading the things, it is a mixed one. They are saying that yes very positive achievements on things like marine fisheries, chemical safety, water and sanitation. But also remember this, that what they are focusing is a plan of action. You should also remember the commitments which were made in the partnerships with nearly a billion dollars on water and sanitation committed by the United States plus other commitments on forest, on agriculture, on energy, seven hundred million euros from the European Union on energy, waterfall life initiative, commitments from Japan, major commitments from the corporate sector, which are in terms of concrete programmes applicable in specific places over specific time periods. And I have just seen the coverage in say The Economist , or the London Times, and for that matter, just at the conclusion of the conference in the New York Times, and they have all picked on this, that yes it may not have been high-sounding in terms of grand phrases, but it has actions in it.

LITTLEJOHNS: I must have been reading the wrong clippings.

HAMANN: Substantively speaking, Sir, one of the main goals of this exercise, I remember you saying before the conference, is really to show how the fight against poverty could work hand in hand with economic development and environmental protection. How did you achieve that? Or did you achieve that first of all? And if so, how?

DESAI: Three key areas. The commitment on water and sanitation close-building to the goals that we have on health. Second, the important breakthroughs that we got on desertification because of the fact that we have a replenishment of GF of 2.9 billion and an agreement that GF can be used for desertification programmes. Third, and this is probably the most important thing on the energy side, more important that the renewable, a commitment on getting energy to the energy poor; the two billion were outside the modern energy net. These three I would rate as probably the three most significant forward steps in this connection between poverty and environmental stress. There are also other things on agriculture, in fact the General Assessment in this area is quite positive in terms of what the conference achieved. So I would argue that that key role has been achieved, but that was not the only one; sustainable consumption was as important. In many ways what we have got in sustainable consumption, I think went beyond what a lot of people were expecting at the beginning.

HAMANN: Another criticism of this conference, and Michael I think has touched upon that, is that these things have become so big whether it is this conference in particular or I think for example of the racism conference last year in South Africa as well, a lot of people are saying these have become just simply too big and unworkable to address the issues at hand. Is that your opinion? And are we at a point where we should look maybe and explore different ways of addressing these global issues?

DESAI: Let's have a look at what you get out of small processes. The smallest process that you can imagine, perhaps let's see one of the G8 summits. Fine, let's do a comparison of what comes out of a G8 summit and what comes out of this process. They have got small group meeting, behind close doors, here you have got sixty five thousand people meeting in the open in full view of media. And I say we get more out of our process, and I say we get more not just in terms of the agreed, negotiated products; we get more in terms of concrete commitments on action and partnerships, we do far more to raise awareness and, most important of all, we connect people. That is what happened in Johannesburg. There were people who were working on water resources in India, who were meeting people who were working on water resources in Africa at the field level. And the sort of interaction that that led to later thirty partnerships, amongst these groups so that they are networking across national boundaries went beyond just advocacy into actually partnerships and implementation. And I would say that any day, in fact given a choice between a small group negotiation and a

group process like this in something like sustainable development or social development where you really have to mobilize the community, this makes far more sense. And it is absolutely essential, to the new internationalism.

FREEMAN: Mr. Desai, speaking on a positive note that you mentioned, as someone who covered the summit, I can say, I can report and testify that it was the best run summit I have ever attended, the best run conference I have ever attended. On the other hand, you mentioned the sense of urgency, and that reminds me that Rio ended in a sense of urgency also. And the..

LITTLEJOHNS: The Earth Summit...

FREEMAN: The Earth Summit in Rio, ten years ago, and as we have seen many of the commitments that were made in Rio have been ignored and neglected. What reason do we have to believe that the commitments made in Johannesburg will be any more honored?

DESAI: I think this is a fair question and a great deal will depend on how we follow this one up. A lot people say wonderful things there and this is why I ended the Johannesburg meeting saying that if anybody thinks our work has ended here, they are wrong. We have to assume that our work has only started here, which means a great deal depends on how we follow up in the five areas:: water, energy, health, agriculture, biodiversity. How do we actually ensure that these wonderful partnerships, which were announced by governments, by NGOs, by industry, actually get implemented? Fortunately we have a mandate. We have a mandate to follow these up, through the Commission on Sustainable Development but that is not enough. We have to really spell out how we are actually going to hold people responsible and accountable for what they did here. And this is the other thing –there was far more discussion here of accountability and responsibility than in Rio. In fact if you remember, the theme of the conversation between the heads of state and governments was making it happen. And I hope that we can really follow up. For instance the Global Reporting Initiative for the Corporations and...

LITTLEJOHNS: For the what? The Corporations?

DESAI: Yes. It is called the Global Reporting Initiative, it is a joint exercise of large transnational corporations so the media, NGO groups involved in social and environmental matters and international organizations. It puts stronger set of standards, which corporations will observe in social and environmental reporting. And that is not only

accountability initiatives, there are others: on mining for instance, which were announced there. So I hope that we can pursue this, and I would see the next challenge. In Rio it was a conception thing in some ways, it was a road map. In Johannesburg, I think we moved from a road map to a route plan, actual action. Now what we need is to see how we actually have a system of instrumentation, which measures what sort of rate we are moving down this road, and how or who is going to keep tracks of those instruments; and what are we going to do if you are not moving faster. So this is the way I believe you are trying to progress. And I hope that we can do this.

FREEMAN: But will this be a subject for a 2012 summit?

DESAI: No. My last speech there was the speech that I wanted the Secretary-General of the next summit to make, and essentially I listed all of the things were agreed to and in fact what sort of life it would promise our people, and how we can build on that. So I hope that is not the meeting that we are going to have.

LITTLEJOHNS: So when is that going to be?

DESAI: Whenever it is, it is not set now. Because remember this, what we have done in Johannesburg is not all the way to sustainability. If you say halve poverty, absolute poverty, we are only half way to sustainability. If you say reduce by half the number of people who don't have access to safe water sanitation, you are only half way there. So we have to look beyond 2015 to 2050. And in many ways what we are trying to do in Johannesburg is I what I call the 15-50 vision. One dimension is 2015; I have the millennium goals, set another new goals put in Johannesburg, focused on addressing extreme poverty, immediate problems of environmental stress. Well that is only half way there. You have to look beyond to 2050, for longer-term sustainability. That is where the Agenda on Sustainable Consumption, which came out of Johannesburg, is so valuable. I cannot go to the large countries of the world and focus my energy policy simply in terms of 2015. I have to look beyond to 2050.

HAMANN: But a lot of people would argue – I mean you talk about being able to monitor and making sure that these commitments will be upheld. But isn't an easier way – and a lot of critics will say that the easiest way to do that is to have the governments agree to targets. Instead of having to follow them afterwards, why don't they agree to targets now, and then that will be taken care of.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Nitin Desai, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs.

DESAI: Targets and timetables. When we started negotiations and even right up to the Johannesburg meeting itself, a lot of people said, more targets, no timetables. Look at the programme now. Let's count. We have at least twenty-five places where there are explicit timetables, and perhaps about a dozen places where there are explicit targets. Except for renewable energy, the one place where the Europeans have proposed this target in the end, what we have is not a target, but a strong phrase with a sense of urgency greatly increase the share of nenewables. In most of the other places the targets are there, the timetables are there. This is the big change, where the pressure of Johannesburg, the presence of the NGOs, the political visibility of the process really led to change. Of course people compromise, but it is not as if everything moved towards the direction of those who did not want any commitment. A lot of them move to the middle. Much more in fact toward the end where there are clear targets and timetables. You have enough there to monitor. It is there.

FREEMAN: Mr. Desai, one of the achievements I thought of Johannesburg summit was the recognition of the importance of investment and business in development. But also at Johannesburg, Robert Mugabe got up and made a speech defending his taking the farms away from white farmers, and he was warmly applauded. And the next day, I understand some African currencies dropped on the currency market. How can we overcome the difficulties of those kinds of policies?

DESAI: I would say that one of the things we still have to address is the types of linkages that you are talking about. We have a programme here. There are talks in terms of investing in education, health, in environmental management, in safety, in consumption and so on. What happens if a financial crisis throws you out of gear? So this is why you should not see Johannesburg in isolation; it must be seen as part of a package, which includes Monterey and Doha. And really, if we want success, we have to see all of them being implemented effectively because if we just try to pursue the Johannesburg gain, without really getting the money which was promised in Monterey, without really getting...

LITTLEJOHNS: Monterey, you mean the meeting on...

DESAI: The meeting on finance for development. And without getting the type of arrangements for greater financial stability that were promised in Monterey, then this won't

work. And similarly the trade access, the market access issues, which are supposed to be tackled in Doha. So you are right, that we really have to see the whole thing, as part of a package, and I think that in many ways the challenge of follow up that we face is not to get back into our silos, not to say: 'ok here is somebody we'll follow whether the water and sanitation target is being achieved.' So this is an easy cop out, 'Oh we couldn't do it because of a financial crisis,' you see. So we have to see a way of handling this as a package. And this is I think the challenge that the UN system is confronted by.

FREEMAN: Do you see this plan of implementation influencing the Doha round of trade talks that are coming up?

DESAI: As you know many issues, well one particular issue, which is in Doha, which is market access in agriculture subsidies was hotly debated here. And I hope that the language that was finally agreed to in the text does give some pointers as to the direction which we should move in the Doha round. But really the real agreement will have to come as part of the Doha round. A lot of people are focused on the issue of agricultural subsidies. But you also have to talk about market access. The two are not necessarily the same. You may get rid of subsidies but you must still have a tight constraint on actually being able to ship goods to a particular place and sell them. And I hope that a whole lot of these issues do receive systematic attention in Doha. So it has to be a package.

HAMANN: Speaking of Doha and the WTO, obviously there was a big participation on the part of private business in this conference. How did that work out? Did that work out to your expectations? A lot of people were saying 'well you know this is towing to big business. We are sort of...'

DESAI: We have to make business part of the solution. We have to make sure that business is part of the solution. A confrontationist view of business is not going to work at a global level. Take energy. If I want to reach energy to the two billion who don't have energy, there is a serious limit to what I would actually achieve if I just rely on a normal mechanisms of ODA and public spending. I have to make the energy countries of the world a part the solution; and they were there. They were there – the largest electricity utilities in the world. At least two of the largest oil companies of the world, committing themselves to working with governments with our non-government law organizations, for instance in getting universal rural electrification in thirty years. So we had to bring them in. And I would say that

if we want even standards to work, peer pressure is an important part of the answer. And peer pressure works if industry is seen as part of the exercise of committing oneself to sustainable development, and that is the difference. These great big – there are lot of CEOs that came, it was very structured, it was very organized, and the message is registered. And other corporations say ok, this is what might be what they expect me to behave.

HAMANN: So you are satisfied with the way the conversation between big business and the others is moving forward?

DESAI: I would say we made a good ... It was still too confrontational at times, business is very happy with the proceedings, they have given perhaps the highest marks to the summit. It was very structured, and I think a great deal depends on how we work out the relationship in the actual implementation of the partnerships. Remember on Kyoto, one of the things that we got there, was this signature between the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and I think Green Peace, wasn't it?

HAMANN: Yes.

DESAI: On Kyoto. Here there is a very militant global...

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean on global warming.

DESAI: On global warming issues. The Business Council for Sustainable Development and Green Peace came together and signed an agreement. And here let me mention one bonus. The fact that there were announcements by Canada, Russia, India and China on the Kyoto protocol, the Kyoto protocol is now over the top. That means we will get the fifty five percent.

LITTLEJOHNS: But the United States is...

DESAI: Yes, but the dynamics that will be generated by the fact that Kyoto is in force, plus what has been agreed in this programme on green energy. This is the strongest statement on green energy that we have gotten out of a universal UN process, which included all the oil producers for instance, and between that, it is going to change the dynamic so much that I expect that there will be industry pressure in this country to start dialoguing on this issue.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Desai, the Johannesburg conference was an occasion for an awful lot of America-bashing, which is not exactly likely to endear the United Nations on conferences of this sort to American leaders. Wasn't this a bit exaggerated?

DESAI: Absolutely. The United States was thoroughly engaged, they participated constructively, they made compromises, they certainly did not have these extreme positions, which is attributed to them saying 'No targets, No timetables.' They accepted, as I said quite a few. And they have come up with major partnerships. Their point was, 'we believe in action. And we want to see a meeting which gets this action going.' And they did make major commitments. So I would say they were fully engaged. There will be differences and there are differences particularly on Kyoto, but at least as far as the Johannesburg Summit is concerned, I would like to say that the United States government was fully engaged, participated intensively in every process, and made significant commitment in terms of actual actions, on water sanitation, on energy, on forest, and on agriculture.

LITTLEJOHNS: So that heckling of Colin Powel was unjustified?

DESAI: I would say not only is it unjustified because particularly the charges would not be accurate, I think it is unjustified because in a sense it is violating the basic rule of dialogue and good faith. If you give people an opportunity to speak, they must give others an opportunity to speak and be heard. So my objection to that is that I have no views on the merits of what they have to say, but it is wrong to shout a person down, when you have been given the right to participate in a parliamentary assembly. It is wrong to use that to shout somebody down, it endangers the participation of those people's colleagues in future conferences. They are basically endangering their own future participation of their own colleagues if they keep on like this. I hope – fortunately it was short, nobody reacted violently, least of all the United States, and therefore I hope it settles, but I think it was wrong of them to break the basic rules under which they participate in the process.

FREEMAN: You mentioned ODA, which is development assistance, which has been going down ever since Rio. Will it turn around now as a result of Johannesburg?

DESAI: Basically between Monterey and Johannesburg. Monterey had the commitments. Johannesburg and the Millennium Summit have the programmes. But you see, you can't just start getting money unless you know what the money is for. And basically what we are getting out of the great conferences is in an agreed framework on 'what is this money for? What are these global ledges for which ODA is going to be used?' The old ODA, which was essentially driven by strategic considerations, has not disappeared all together, but it's certainly not something that can drive the machine, but what we have developed over these

years of this decade is a set of things, which we consider to be global ends, whether they relate to social development, whether they relate to environmental management, whether they relate to human rights, and this is what we tried to do in Johannesburg. Here is what we want the money for: water and sanitation for all; for getting energy to poor people, desertification and control and land management, the capacity building for environmental monitoring and assessment. So I hope that between the two, we can really get that 13 billion, which was promised in Monterey moving, and reverse the trend. It is the largest increase in ODA that we ever had.

HAMANN: So it seems as though hearing you with Monterey and Johannesburg, we now are on way to a lot of improvement then and on the way to ...

DESAI: I'd say that basically if we see the barriers. What were the barriers to Rio? One, the macro economic climate as Jack was saying since '92, worsened. So we really didn't have the macro economic basis for a thrust in any given area. ODA was down; countries were in trouble, debt problems continued, etc. Second, we really did not know what it meant in programatic terms. We were still working in silos. So it was a wonderful concept. It changed the way people talked about problems. We could not move from that. But, what difference does it make in the way in which you design programmes at the working level? This is what Johannesburg has tried to do. So two important barriers to actual implementation in Rio have to a certain extent been addressed. But political will, in a sense of urgencies, is the most important. And this is something, which will have to be, we will have to keep working at. Because this -- you could well have the same situation as in Rio, that after you go home, you forget all about it, and other priorities take over.

LITTLEJOHNS: But that always happens after summit conferences that the UN hosts, doesn't it?

DESAI: No, not necessarily. I think for instance that this sort of impact which the Copenhagen Summit on Social Development had -- in fact that's a summit where the impact actually increased over time. That immediately after the summit, it didn't seem to have that much impact, but today all of the millennium goals are drawn from that summit. And they have...

LITTLEJOHNS: But not being met.

DESAI: But they are being pursued. This is what the aid has been given for. This is what the aid has been given for -- whatever was achieved.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Desai, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Nitin Desai, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs. He was interviewed by Louis Hamann of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* and Jack Freeman of *the Earth Times*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of this programme can be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to World Chronicle, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017. This programme is a Public Affairs Presentation of this station from United Nations Television.